How Many Hospitals Have Christians Built?

Posted by Living Life Without a Net

I came across this article by accident while searching for something else entirely, but now that I've seen it, I think it deserves to get another public airing. (Once you read it, check out the website where it was published: American Atheists.)

The Question of Atheists Hospitals

TALKING BACK

The Question of Atheist Hospitals

This article challenges the notion that organized religion is necessary for establishing hospitals. The old challenge, "How many hospitals have Atheist built?" is debunked through a brief presentation of the facts.

By **Doug Ittner**

Conversations with Christian apologists often turn up the question, "How many hospitals have Atheists built?" The question is directed towards a justification of organized religion as a preferred establishment over Atheism. The assumption of the answer is zero. The question is not a new one; Col. Robert Green Ingersoll attacked the issue in his essay, "What Infidels Have Done." [1]

> One hundred years after Christ had died suppose someone had asked a Christian, What hospitals have you built? What asylums have you founded? They would have said "None."Suppose three hundred years after the death of Christ the same questions had been asked the Christian, he would have said "None, not one." Two hundred years more and the answer would have been the same. And at that time the Christian could have told the questioner that the Mohammedans had built asylums before the Christians. He could also have told him that there had been orphan asylums in China for hundreds and hundreds of years, hospitals in India, and hospitals for the sick at Athens.

To be fair to the Christian apologist, perhaps the question should be directed more towards modern times, after Christianity has been well established. America, as Christian historical revisionists have claimed, was established under Christian principles and is therefore a Christian nation. Therefore it makes sense to conclude that a Christian nation would build hospitals faster than a colony of ants could build an anthill.

The oldest American hospital in existence is New York's famed Bellevue hospital, established in 1736. The hospital, initially a six-bed hospital, was not createdby any religious institution but was a municipal hospital created by a secular, non-religious government. [2] The city was filling a gap left by the lazy religious institutions who were apparently failing in their mission to care for the sick and ailing.

Bellevue wasn't the first American hospital though. The first American hospital was created as a result of a business venture. Master Jacob Hendrickszen Varrevanger, surgeon to the Dutch West India Company, created the first hospital in the same region. New York wasn't in existence at this time; the area was referred to as New Amsterdam, and the year was 1658. [3]

The religious weren't in any rush to create any institutions for public welfare. Ben Franklin, inventor, ambassador to France and Founding Father managed to find more time than the entire American religious industry to develop the first fire department, public library, and even another hospital (founded in 1751). [4]

The first university was created in Franklin's town of Philadelphia as well. America's first university was not religious either. Rather than being another center for educating clergy as in old European universities, this university (University of Pennsylvania, established in 1751) would train students for careers in business and public service. [5] Religious missionaries were apparently too busy caring for people's afterlives rather than their lives on Earth.

Surely after 200 years of America's signing of the Constitution the religious industry has developed a system of hospitals throughout the United States. In a sense they have. Hundreds of hospitals bearing a connection to some religious institutions dot the American landscape. The largest and best known of these is the Catholic hospital system. Surely a hospital with a Catholic affiliation must mean the hospital is truly a religious hospital founded and financed by the Catholic Church. Alas, even this is not the case; Catholic hospitals are merely public hospitals with a Catholic label and fewer health services.

In America, as of 1999, 13% of all hospitals were religious (totaling 18% of all hospital beds); that's 604 out of 4,573 hospitals. [6] Despite the presence of organized religion in America, the Church has managed to scrape together only a few hospitals. Of these 604 hospitals many are a product of mergers with public, non-sectarian hospitals. Not all of these 604 hospitals are Catholic; many are Baptist, Methodist, Shriner (Masonic), Jewish, etc.

Despite the religious label, these so-called religious hospitals are more public than public hospitals. Religious hospitals get 36% of all their revenue from Medicare; public hospitals get only 27%. In addition to that 36% of public funding they get 12% of their funding from Medicaid. Of the remaining 44% of funding, 31% comes from county appropriations, 30% comes from investments, and only 5% comes from charitable contributions (not necessarily religious). The percentage of Church funding for Church-run hospitals comes to a grand total of 0.0015 percent. [7]

The claim that the religious build hospitals gives the illusion that the religious are more charitable than the secular, non-religious. With hospitals, at least, that isn't the case. Every hospital writes off a certain percentage of medical revenue as charitable care. The religious hospitals aren't the least charitable of hospitals, but they're close to it. For-profit hospitals provided, on average, only 0.8% of their gross patient revenue as charity care; religious hospitals came in with 1.9%. On the other hand the secular non-profit hospitals had 2% and the godless secular public hospitals provided 5.1%. [8]

It's only been 200 years since America was founded, perhaps in another 200 years the religious will catch up to the secular government in providing charitable medical care. It gets worse for the religious institutions though. Religious hospitals provide fewer medical services than the secular hospitals. The Catholic hospitals, despite being publicly funded hospitals, refuse to provide certain medical services on religious grounds. Many Catholic hospitals refuse to provide infertility treatments, birth control, abortion and emergency contraception to rape victims. It is the position of the Catholic church that, "A female who has been raped should be able to defend herself against a potential conception from the sexual assault." [9] That means it's a woman's responsibility to get her rapist to wear a condom.

Catholic hospitals have directives opposing informed consent to patients regarding side effects of potential harmful health care decisions as well as policies preventing euthanasia (whereby a terminally ill patient must be kept on life support despite the patient's demands to end treatment).

Catholic hospitals aren't alone in promoting their religion in the medical field. Mormon hospitals will refuse sterilization to women who have had less than five children or are younger than 40 years of age. Seventh-day Adventist hospitals won't serve meat or caffinated beverages in their cafeterias. Southern Baptist hospitals won't provide abortion services. [10]

Robert Ingersoll's response to the question, "What hospitals have Atheists built?" is surprisingly relevant over a hundred years later. Despite European Christians being on the American continent for hundreds of years, they have been lacking in providing the medical charity they are credited for. The answer to the question "How many American hospitals have Atheists built?" is "All of them."

Of the 13% of religious hospitals, all of them are maintained by public funds. Those public funds are not paid for exclusively by the religious, they certainly aren't supported by American churches. If the religious hospitals were to be truly religious and separated from secular governmental subsidies they would collapse. The question that the Christian apologist should be asked is, "Where are all the truly religious hospitals?" Slapping a Catholic or Methodist label upon a hospital wall isn't sufficient enough to create a truly independent, private religious hospital free from Atheist support.

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